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ABSTRACT

Education and training of management personnel in developing nations have been patterned after the American system. Unfortunately, efforts at transplanting such knowledge has neglected the cultural nuances unique to the various nations, resulting in incomplete success. Intercultural communication barriers can be posed by such cultural features as language, religion, values and attitudes, politics and education. Certain common sense oriented, practical solutions can minimize such barriers:(1) textbooks and other printed materials used to transfer knowledge should be oriented to the client group; (2) audiovisual materials must also be appropriate to the host culture; (3) case studies should be assigned to participants to write, based on their own experiences or organizations; (4) role playing exercises can be used effectively in programs in Middle Eastern environments; (5) small group exercises and transactional analysis can be used effectively with Saudi managers; (6) native personnel should be used to gather information of a local nature; (7) instructors should encourage students to participate in class discussions; (8) instructors should receive social orientation with a "host family"; and (9) instructors should have some knowledge of the host country's language. (HTH)

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INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION BARRIERS AND MANAGEMENT EDUCATION IN DEVELOPING NATIONS: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION BARRIERS AND MANAGEMENT EDUCATION IN DEVELOPING NATIONS: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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ABSTRACT

Professional management practice has been a principal factor in the economic development and technological achievements experienced by the U.S. Many developing nations view the American approach as a model. Education and training of management personnel in developing nations have been patterned after the American system. Unfortunately, the transplanting of such knowhow often has been overshadowed by a neglect of the cultural nuances unique to the various nations resulting in suboptimization of efforts. In this paper, the authors examine the intercultural communication barriers contributing to these problems, cite several illustrative incidents, and propose possible ways of dealing with them.

INTRODUCTION

The word "culture" might mean different things to different people; yet there exists enough consensus among scholars that culture is a complex pattern of thinking and behavior which has developed over a period of time and which is typical of a given society. However, references to similarity or dissimilarity among cultures take on an absolute stance when such comparisons are at best illusory. That cultural background plays a major role in the shaping of individual and societal values is indisputable. Thus the whole milieu of human acceptance and rejection of values, philosophies, and ideas is all subject to a filtering process in which the various cultural nuances serve as screening devices.

Integral to any culture are the patterns of communication which provide the vital link among members of society. In a sense the two are inseparable and form an organic union. Thus patterns of communication can be just as complex as the culture itself. Given that, when one looks at a culture from the outside, the whole pandora's box is opened because of the dissimilarity in perception. The same could be said with respect to adapting one culture's ideology to the requirements of another culture. In this respect education and training for management personnel in developing countries provide a prime example of the complexity involved in, and the inviability of, idea transplant without consideration of the host society's culture.

The U.S. industrial development and economic prosperity are attributed in no small measure to the professional management that has been characteristic of the U.S. economic system. Developing nations, in their efforts to fulfill their economic dreams of industrialization and self-sufficiency, often have looked up to the "West" for ideas about professional management. Existing and new educational programs have been modeled after the U.S. experience. Traditional systems of education are being replaced with the functional orientation of the U.S. educational system, especially in professional institutions. Examples of such practices can be found in many Asian and Middle Eastern countries. In this quest, however, programs have been implemented without giving serious considerations regarding the proper fit between borrowed knowledge and the capacity of host societies to absorb such knowledge. Certain obvious problems issue from such blind adaptation of imported knowledge. No attempt is made here to elaborate on these. However, certain basic questions emerge.

1. Are management principles, as practiced by U.S. managers, culturally transferable, as is? Or, do they need to be modified to recognize the varying organizational relationships found in other cultures? The U.S. self-reference criterion indicates solutions to managerial problems which may be unacceptable in the context of another culture.

2. Teaching from the viewpoint of one culture tends to be interpreted differently in another culture as there is almost no common frame of reference. Clouding this lack of communication occurs even more in those circumstances where the educator and student are speaking in a language that is not the primary language of either. In this instance, it is more surprising to get a common understanding than not.

3. Should developing nations attempt to promote totally indigeneous concepts for professional management which would give consideration to their unique cultural heritage? Is that a viable alternative?

Before attempting to answer the above and related questions, it would be appropriate to examine some of the intercultural communication barriers which seem to have a recurring pattern.

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION BARRIERS

A somewhat less formal definition of culture was given earlier. It was also pointed out that culture and communication form an organic unity that is indivisible. Intercultural communication then may be described as the pattern of behavior that takes place between and among members of various societies. Any obstacle in the process of completing the communication circuit hinders understanding. An understanding of such barriers can be developed by looking at a formal definition of culture. One authority defines culture as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and

any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Taylor, 1871, p. 1). Many elements of the cultural composite are included in this definition, and few would question the legitimacy of that definition in terms of today's concept of culture. Terpstra (1978) identifies eight cultural components of the international business environment which have relevance in this context. These and the associated elements appear in Table 1.

In terms of intercultural communication, every one of the elements in Table 1 is a potential communication barrier. However, some of these are more so than others. For example, intuitively, it would appear that language, religion, values and attitudes, politics, social organization, technology, and material culture have far-reaching implications. A detailed discussion of the potential problems is excluded for the sake of brevity. However, a number of situations typifying intercultural communication barriers are included in the next section, which is intended to illustrate the point.

CASES AND INCIDENTS INVOLVING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION BARRIERS

Several incidents of a self-explanatory nature depicting intercultural communication barriers are summarized here. These are drawn from the authors' personal experiences as well as that of others as reported in the literature.

Incident 1

An expatriate upon arriving in his host country left two cables and funds to cover the cost of transmission with the employer's post office personnel and assumed the cable had already been sent. A week later, much to the surprise and anguish of the expatriate, the cable forms were left in his post box with a note written in the host country language which was absolutely foreign to the expatriate. Upon enquiry the expatriate was told that the message in the "foreign language" meant "please write in easy English." The cables never left for the destination.

Incident 2

In teaching business policy to students in a Middle Eastern university, the instructor assigned a project involving "golf balls in dozens." Although a few professed to know what golf was, hardly anyone knew what a dozen was. Nothing in the Middle East comes in dozens--even eggs come in "flats" of thirty. (Perhaps an indication of adherance to decimal system!) However, perhaps even more remarkable, none admitted ignorance of this prior to the assignment. It was rather like an American student of the same instructor whose spelling was so atrocious that he was advised to use a spelling dictionary any time he had any doubt about a word. But whenever he was confronted subsequently with the same problem, the response was, "I was so confident that it was correct!"

Table I. Composition of the Cultural Environment of International Business[1]

Cultural Components	Elements	
LANGUAGE	Spoken language	Language hierarchy
	Written language	Linguistic pluralism
	Official language	International languages
	Mass media	
RELIGION	Sacred objects	Philosophical systems
	Beliefs and norms	Prayer
	Taboos	Holidays
	Rituals	Holy days
VALUES AND ATTITUDES TOWARD	Time	Achievement
	Work	Wealth
	Change	Scientific method
	Risk-taking	
LAW	Common law	Code law
	Foreign Law	Home country law
	Antitrust policy	International law
	Regulation	
EDUCATION	Formal education	Vocational training
	Primary education	Secondary education
	Higher education	Human resources planning
	Literacy level	
POLITICS	Nationalism	Sovereignty
	Imperialism	Power
	National interests	Ideologies
	Political Risk	
TECHNOLOGY AND MATERIAL CULTURE	Transportation	Energy systems
	Tools and objects	Communications
	Urbanization	Science
	Invention	
SOCIAL ORGANIZATIONS	Kinship	Authority structures
	Interest groups	Social institutions
	Social mobility	Social stratification
	Status systems	

[1]Adapted from Vern Terpstra, 1978, p. xiv.

Incident 3

One of the authors prepared text material for use in the basic business class in a Middle Eastern university. The phrase "Acts of God" was included in referring to natural calamities and disasters outside of the control of the manager. One devout Muslim student was quick to point out, privately, to the instructor that in Islam, everything issues from acts of God and use of phrases like "Acts of God" is an attempt to categorize life into those that are with and without God.

Incident 4

Mr. Jones and Mr. Watson had an appointment with Mr. Mahmoud, a Saudi official, at 10.00 a.m. to discuss some business arrangements. They arrived on time only to be kept waiting for an hour. When they were finally ushered into his office there were several other people in the room.

After serving coffee and engaging in seemingly endless small talk (which was interrupted frequently by the telephone) Mr. Mahmoud finally turned to the Americans and opened up the subject of their visit. As much as Jones and Watson were eager to get on with the serious discussion--which they felt involved rather sensitive and private matters--they were quite hesitant because the other visitors remained in the room within easy listening distance (Lee, 1980, p. 23).

Incident 5

An economist experienced considerable difficulty in teaching the concept of "interest" to his predominantly Muslim sudents. Interest is considered usury under Islamic teachings, and there is considerable resistance on the part of the believers to accept the concept. However, the instructor was able to overcome the difficulty by illustrating the effect of inflation on the time value of money, a concept to which the students were more receptive.

Incident 6

Charley Sands was assigned to the Kingdom (of Saudi Arabia) to train young Saudi mechanics in the repair and maintenance of newly imported road-building equipment. Much of the training had focused on the effective use of the maintenance manuals prepared by the manufacturer. The training program went smoothly enough, but later, during his follow-up inspection, Charley discovered that the machinery had fallen into disrepair. On inquiry he learned that despite the training, the maintenance manual was rarely consulted by the Saudi mechanics. This nonuse of the manual caused a great deal of hair-pulling in the American company headquarters, but no one could figure out what to do about it (Lee, 1980, p. 51).

Incident 7

It has often been reported that Prime Minister Indira Gandhi (like millions of other citizens of India) consulted astrologers to find

the most appropriate moment for starting any project so that the project would have the greatest chance for success.

Incident 8

Some cultures equate forecasting and planning with prophesying which is contrary to their religious teachings. God alone is the sole determinant of the future, and as such man should not attempt to plan for the future, something over which he has no control. Clearly, such philosophy can be a hindrance in teaching and writing about forecasting and planning any aspect of life including that of business affairs.

Incident 9

A major American firm in the Middle East practiced discrimination in compensation and benefits among its several thousand expatriate personnel. The primary basis for salary and benefit determination was the nationality of the individual.

Incident 10

Any type of conflict of interest is looked down upon in Western society. In other areas of the world, it is not uncommon to find individuals holding responsible positions in an organization while also having other business interests elsewhere as well as supplying goods and services to the primary employer. For example, in a university setting, a senior administrator supplies the institution with word-processing equipment sold by a firm owned by him.

The foregoing illustrations are but a small sample of the examples one can see in operation.

Since culture permeates all aspects of life in any given society, any attempt to inculcate different value systems must take into account the host society's capacity to absorb. Questions regarding acceptability, adaptability, transferability, societal resistance, practicality, and feasibility should be of paramount concern. In the case of developing nations where the educational system and its infrastructure are still evolving, attempts may be made to see short-term, quick results. In the quest for such short-term results, the concerns expressed above tend to be ignored. In the final analysis, elaborate programs fail to measure up to the expectations. What is gained is in fact considerable loss of time and precious resources as well as a tendency to reject anything of that sort in the future.

There are certain common-sense oriented, practical solutions to minimize the problems presently experienced in transferring knowledge into other cultures. That there is appeal for the modern concepts of management in other cultures is fairly well accepted. Sustaining that acceptance is going to depend upon how the knowledge transfer is effected and the results gained from the transfer. It is believed that the programs and strategies outlined in the next section can provide effective answers to these problems.

TRANSFER OF MANAGEMENT CONCEPTS: PROGRAMS AND STRATEGIES

Transfer of knowledge can be carried out by either home-country personnel or expatriate personnel. The educational background and preparation of home country personnel may involve strictly local training, a combination of local and overseas training, or primarily one of overseas training. Expatriate personnel, likewise, may have gained their training either from their home country or from a another country, or from both. Examples: A Saudi Arabian trained in the local educational institutions, or having had basic education in his home country and higher education in England or America; an Egyptian trained in the U.S. and teaching in Saudi Arabia; and an American trained in the U.S. and teaching in Saudi Arabia. Obviously such variations in the background of the individuals also will affect the way knowledge is transferred and accepted. Bearing these in mind, the authors would like to cite some of the programs and methods they have found useful in their capacity as professors in a third country.

Printed Material

Since printed material is the most widely used medium in imparting knowledge, it is extremely important that text books, and other literature used to transfer knowledge, be oriented to the client group. The authors, in their overseas assignments, had to use text material written primarily by Americans for consumption by American students. Among others, two problems persisted: (1) the difficulty in learning and teaching in a language that was a second language to the students, and (2) the overseas students' lack of familiarity with American cultural values and practices. Students constantly sought dictionary assistance and experienced slowness in reading and comprehending material for lack of familiarity with the illustrations and examples used in the U.S.-oriented text books.

The need to have appropriate text material for the particular market is of utmost importance. Both educators and publishers have a responsibility in this area. If it were possible to publish textbooks with minimum of cultural bias and at language level commensurate with the background of the client group, the learning experience of these overseas students will be more meaningful. An active effort needs to be mobilized to incorporate the expertise of educators, publishers, planners, and administrators in bringing about this revolution in the preparation of text material.

Audio-Visual Aids

The old adage that a picture is worth a thousand words is an appropriate statement in the case of teaching people of cultural background which differs from that of the instructor. Or at least that has been found to be true in the experience of the authors. The students in traditional classroom settings and participants in management development programs were able to grasp and absorb the material presented more thoroughly when audio-visual aids were used. A study conducted by the Wharton School of Business for the 3M Company

confirms this observation in that participants retain considerably more when presentation is accompanied with audio-visual material.[2]

Video technology offers a very effective and inexpensive medium for developing programs for use in developing nations. Since the majority of 16mm films and videotapes on the subject of management and related areas have a Western orientation, their use in Third World nations could create some of the same problems as encountered with text material printed for Western consumption. However, with the low cost of video equipment and material and the reusability of magnetic tape, a few creative minds can develop effective material suitable for particular client groups. Likewise, small group exercises and student presentations may be recorded for later study and critique by participants and evaluators.

Case Studies

Case studies do find appeal among overseas students and management personnel. However, case studies have been found to be even more effective if the participants were assigned to write cases relating to their own experiences or that of their organizations. Clearly such assignments can bring to the discussion situations that are typical of the host society environment. Intuitively, such an approach would be superior to that of bringing cases and incidents drawn from other societies unless such incidents are used in dealing with cross-cultural dimensions of business management.

A word of caution: Before assigning cases, it would be appropriate to explain the case study approach as a means of individual development and to provide some clues on how to write cases that would be effective. The educational and training systems in some societies may not have provided such opportunities, and therefore the participants might find the approach itself really "foreign."

Role Playing

Role-playing exercises seemed to find approval, especially in management development programs, in the Middle Eastern environment. In a society where status, position, symbols of power, and rank evoke respect as well as stratify people into different hierarchy, role-playing exercises have helped bring about greater sensitivity, sympathy, empathy, and objectivity in interpersonal relations.

Group Dynamics

Small group exercises and transactional analysis have been found to be effective in working with Saudi managers. Here, as in the case of role playing, they tend to put aside their status shrouds and assume a

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[2]Reported in promotional literature from the 3-M Company.

free-form approach. Work-group dynamics become appropriate follow-up topics in these settings.

Data Collection by Natives

When information of a local nature is desired, native personnel do a better job in gathering such information. This is perhaps due to an unwillingness on the part of host nationals to be open and frank with expatriates. Use of natives also would be appropriate when there exists a language barrier.

Encouragement of Class Participation

Language barriers inhibit active participation by students both in the classroom and in training sessions. The instructor should attempt to encourage students to engage in classroom dialogue. Case studies, small group projects, management games, role playing exercises, in-basket exercises, and leaderless group discussions can all be considered part of the store of techniques that can encourage greater participation by the recipients.

Social Orientation of Expatriates

If expatriates or third-country trained personnel are to provide the training, the need for social orientation is of utmost importance. The trainer or educator, besides having done an extensive study of the host society, needs to be inducted into the host society upon arrival. In the case of the authors, the university developed a "host family" system to receive and orient new arrivals. Usually a faculty colleague, who had already been there for some time, would be assigned to help the new faculty with many of the transitional details (and indeed there are numerous details) and ease into the new environment.

Acquisition of Host-Country Language

Closely related to the social orientation is the desirability of having a fair knowledge of the host country language. Though in many situations one might get by with English, familiarity with the local language is hailed as a definite asset in terms of establishing good rapport and in interacting with the natives. The effectiveness of the expatriate trainers is only as good as the capacity and the willingness they have to adjust and adapt to this new environment.

The authors have had the opportunity to use several of the above approaches and have found them to be effective. No doubt, there exist other equally effective techniques and programs. The key element is the adaptation of any program with the specific client group in mind.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The authors have attempted to provide a brief overview of the general nature of intercultural communication barriers and their effect

on transferring management knowledge through education and training programs in other cultures. Several incidents illustrative of the problems are included along with suggested programs and strategies that can provide an effective avenue for transferring management knowhow into other cultures.

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